



From Niche to Regime: Barriers and Enablers for Scaling Circular and Sharing Economy Initiatives in Europe

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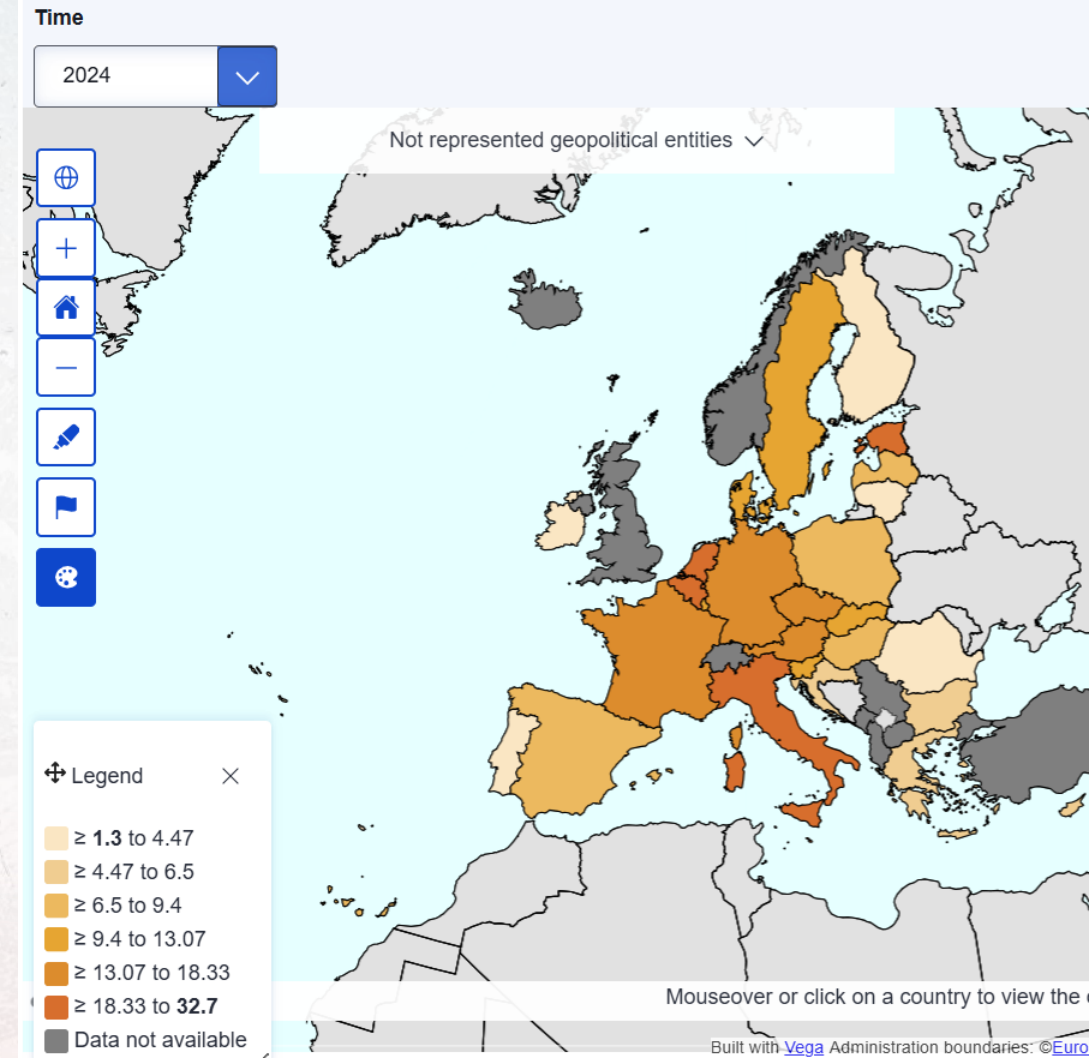
Looking back to
move > forward

Sustainable consumption from
Rio 92 to a **post SDGs** agenda

The circular economy is not scaling fast enough

Despite growing policy support:

- Resource **consumption** continues to **rise**.
- Most circular economy efforts remain **focused on recycling**.
- Repair, reuse, sharing and **sufficiency** initiatives remain **niche** activities.
- Many promising **grassroots initiatives struggle to survive**.



Theoretical Perspective on Scaling

Multi-Level Perspective

Transitions occur through interactions between:

Landscape

- Climate change
- Resource scarcity
- Green Deal
- Economic crises

Regime

- Markets
- Regulations

- Municipal systems
- Infrastructure

Niches

- Experimental innovations
- Grassroots initiatives
- Circular economy pilots

Scaling occurs when niche innovations influence and transform regimes.

Geels (2002); Schot & Geels (2008)

Social Practice Theory

Technologies alone do not scale.

Practices consist of:

- **Materials:** Platforms, repair cafés, reuse centres
- **Competences:** Repair skills, digital literacy
- **Meanings:** Sharing, sufficiency, reuse values

Scaling means: New practices become normalised in everyday life.

The challenge is therefore not only organisational growth but the **transformation of social practices.**

Shove (2010) & Hargreaves et al. (2013)

The TransScale Project



Countries

- Latvia
- Norway
- Denmark
- Poland

Initiatives

- Nomales
- Omigen / Circular Resource Centre
- Repair Café
- Food Sharing

Data sources:

- Case studies - semi-structured interviews
- Practitioner workshops
- Policy workshops
- Literature review



Main Barriers & Enablers

SPT Element

Main Barriers

Materials

Limited reuse infrastructure, collection points, repair facilities, logistics systems, and digital platforms.

Competences

Low awareness, limited knowledge of circular practices, lack of repair skills and specialist expertise.

Meanings

Consumer culture, preference for new products, stigma around reused goods, low trust in circular solutions.

Practice Environment

Fragmented governance, weak policy support, regulatory uncertainty, limited funding, lack of monitoring and long-term strategies.

Main Finding

Scaling is not an organisational issue

There are hybrid business models that create:

- ✓ Environmental value
- ✓ Social value
- ✓ Economic potential

Yet they remain marginal.

Most identified barriers are actually **regime-level barriers**:

- Fragmented governance
- Linear business models
- Existing waste regulations
- Procurement systems
- Consumer expectations
- Established market structures
- ...

rather than technological feasibility.

These stabilise the linear economy.

Regime transformation factors

Transition process

Niche stabilisation

Network building

Institutionalisation

Market formation

Cultural legitimisation

Enablers

Funding, infrastructure

Stakeholder collaboration

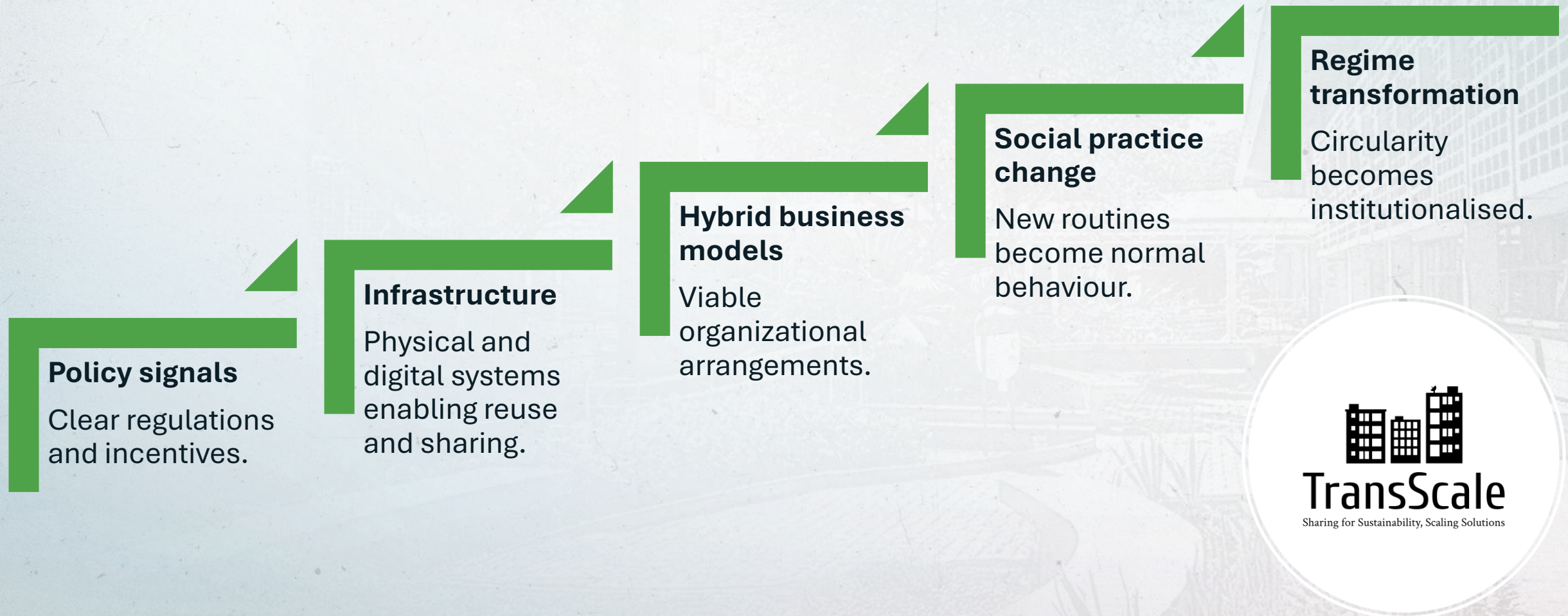
Policy support, procurement

Digital platforms, hybrid business models

Sustainability awareness, community engagement

The main barriers identified in TransScale are not primarily technological. They are institutional, cultural, and infrastructural barriers that prevent circular practices from becoming normalised and embedded within existing socio-technical regimes. Conversely, scaling is enabled when governance, infrastructure, business models, and social practices evolve simultaneously. This suggests that scaling CSE initiatives is fundamentally a socio-technical transition process rather than simply organisational growth.

A TransScale Scaling Framework



Policy response in line with SPT

Recommendation

Develop long-term circular economy strategies

Create stable financing instruments

Reform procurement systems

Invest in reuse infrastructure

Support digital platforms

Legitimise repair, reuse and sharing practices

Materials

Creates stable institutional infrastructure

Provides resources for reuse infrastructure and services

Creates markets for reused and repaired products

Directly strengthens material arrangements (hubs, repair centres, logistics)

Facilitates exchange and access to resources

Indirect effect through supporting infrastructures

Competences

Builds organisational capacities

Supports learning and experimentation

Encourages organisations to develop new procurement skills

Enables practical engagement with reuse

Improves user knowledge and coordination

Encourages skill development

Meanings

Signals that circularity is a societal priority

Demonstrates long-term commitment to circular practices

Legitimises circular products and services

Makes circular practices visible and normal

Normalises sharing and collaborative consumption

Changes social norms and cultural expectations

From Barriers to Leverage Points (Meadows)

Leverage Point (Meadows)	TransScale Examples	Potential Interventions
12–10. Parameters	Taxes, subsidies, grants, funding programmes	VAT reductions for repair, grants for reuse centres, financial incentives
9–8. Feedbacks & Information Flows	Lack of awareness, lack of data, weak monitoring	Material passports, circularity indicators, public reporting, awareness campaigns
7–6. Rules & Governance	Waste regulations, procurement rules, fragmented governance	End-of-waste reform, green public procurement, long-term CE strategies
5–4. System Structure & Self-Organisation	Weak networks, isolated initiatives	Community repair networks, sharing platforms, industrial symbiosis, energy communities
3. Goals of the System	Growth and consumption remain dominant	Shift policy goals from waste management to resource sufficiency and circularity
2. Paradigms	"New is better" culture; consumerism	Promote repair, sharing and sufficiency as desirable social norms
1. Transcending Paradigms	Ability to combine multiple development pathways	Recognising diverse ways of achieving wellbeing beyond consumption growth

From Niche to Regime

Niche innovations do not scale because they grow larger.

They scale because:

- practices become normalised,
- infrastructures become available,
- governance structures adapt,
- markets become supportive.

To normalise circular practices, interventions must target:

- **social meanings** (repair is smart, not second-best),
- **system goals** (resource sufficiency rather than consumption growth),
- **paradigms** (access over ownership, wellbeing over material throughput).

From an SPT perspective, governments do not scale circular economy initiatives directly. They create the conditions under which circular practices can become normalised by strengthening the materials, competences and meanings that sustain those practices. Once these elements align, practices can diffuse and become part of the dominant socio-technical regime.



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